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Book Review (Judith Kilpatrick's There When We Needed Him: Wiley Austin Branton, Civil Rights Warrior)

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Judith Kilpatrick, *There When We Needed Him: Wiley Austin Branton, Civil Rights Warrior,* Fayatteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007. Pp. 230. $29.95 (ISBN 978-1-55728-848-6).

Judith Kilpatrick's book is a brief, careful, and sympathetic biography of an overlooked actor in civil rights legal history. Wiley Austin Branton is commonly assigned a supporting role in accounts of black Arkansans' efforts to desegregate Little Rock's schools. Kilpatrick takes him from the margins and puts this local leader turned national civil rights mover front and center.

Born in 1923, Branton's life spans the twentieth-century black freedom struggle. Branton's family and his Pine Bluff, Arkansas, community helped nurture his activism and leadership skills. His family was affluent, educated, and had the economic and political independence that came from owning a business. His grandparents immersed him in racial uplift work, modeled outspoken leadership, exposed him to cross-race political maneuvering, and taught him business and people skills.

Branton carried on his grandparents's legacy, dedicating his early adulthood to political action. He challenged racial discrimination during World War II. After returning from the war, Branton went to work in the family taxi business. He also became active in the NAACP, registered black workers to vote, and campaigned for white liberals in state and local politics.

Inspired by the NAACP's graduate-school desegregation litigation, Branton pursued a law degree, helping to integrate the University of Arkansas along the way. In the early 1950s, Branton returned to Pine Bluff to run the family business and start a solo practice. While there, he carried on African-American traditions of armed self-defense, even carrying an unconcealed weapon into court after receiving death threats. He also led the NAACP's statewide legal redress committee and participated in religious and black professional organizations.

In the mid-1950s, the Little Rock NAACP chapter asked Branton to represent parents challenging the school board's integration plan. No one expected it to be a big case, least of all Branton. But it was an unexpected turning point, "set[ting] him on a career path much different from the one he expected to have" (74). As white resistance mushroomed, the case catapulted Branton from a life of quiet local prominence onto the national civil rights scene. Soon he was representing Freedom Riders and lunch counter sit-in protesters across the South.

Kilpatrick highlights Branton's underappreciated managerial role in the southern civil rights movement. From 1962 to 1965, Branton ran programs that funneled money to voter registration drives and protesters across the South. Mediating among competing civil rights organizations and cajoling southern sheriffs into releasing young activists, Branton drew on his mix of business, legal, and people skills. Here, Kilpatrick argues, he forged his role as the "prime minister" of the movement: someone skilled enough to be an effective facilitator and modest enough to embrace this background role.

In 1965, Branton headed to Washington, D.C., completing his transition from local, to regional, to national civil rights action. He spent two years in frustratingly ill-defined jobs in the Johnson administration. Branton resigned in 1967 to lead two troubled organizations that threw him in the midst of community factions,

generational splits over civil rights tactics, and the labor movement's contentious internal politics.

By 1971, he was ready to return to private practice. Over the next years, Branton worked in a small African-American law firm, served as dean at Howard Law School, and then joined an elite D.C. firm. Throughout, he devoted himself to recruiting and training a new generation of black lawyers, striving to instill them with the commitment to civil rights that had defined his career from Pine Bluff to the seat of national power.

Kilpatrick's book touches on historiographic themes of interest to African-American legal, political, and social historians. Kilpatrick addresses southern middle-class blacks' activism in the early twentieth century, small-town lawyering at mid-century, and armed self-defense, as well as relations between national and local NAACP offices. Most importantly, Kilpatrick's book contributes to a growing literature on the overlooked but pivotal role less-prominent leaders played in the civil rights movement.

Given these rich historiographic possibilities, it is unfortunate that Kilpatrick makes minimal use of historical literature. This scholarship could have usefully illuminated her story while Branton's experiences might have allowed Kilpatrick to further these historiographic conversations. Engaging this literature might also have provided more critical distance from her sources.

That readers may sometimes need to read beyond the book should not distract from Branton's inspiring life or Kilpatrick's great service in restoring it to historical memory. Kilpatrick portrays a modest, warm, but dogged and courageous fighter who was willing to challenge racism at great personal risk. Branton urged people to remember the many unnamed local black lawyers who fought for civil rights. Kilpatrick's book nicely contributes to historians' recent efforts to do the same for the behind-the-scenes actors who mediated between the grass roots and the big names of the postwar civil rights movement.

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D. Don Welch, *Vanderbilt Law School: Aspirations and Realities,* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 288. $49.95 (ISBN 978-0-8265-1582-7).

In this carefully researched book, D. Don Welch ably chronicles Vanderbilt Law School's slow and arduous rise from obscurity to international eminence. For more than seven decades after its founding in 1874, the Law School suffered from chronic penury, absentee administrators, neglect by Vanderbilt University officials, an inadequate library, geographical prejudices, competition from Tennessee's many other law schools, and fluctuating enrollment. It did not even have its own building until 1962. Admitted to the Association of American Law Schools in 1910, a decade after the AALS was founded, Vanderbilt Law School was excluded from the AALS from 1926 until 1929 on account of low academic standards. It was closed from 1944 to 1946 in the wake of low wartime enrollment. The most textured parts of